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HENRY CARTER ADAMS<sup>1</sup>  
(December 31, 1851, to August 11, 1921)

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An obvious drawback of academic life is that titles tend to obscure persons; and when, as with our colleague Henry Carter Adams, the man dwarfs the title, liability to misjudge or overlook becomes serious. Not till too late, death prompting inquiry or reflection, do we grow aware of the true reasons for the magnitude of our gain and loss. Even so, when we attempt a fit Memorial, the Odyssey of the spirit is all too apt to evade our tardy heed. The career of Professor Adams furnishes a typical case in point.

Henry Carter Adams was born at Davenport, Iowa, December 31, 1851. He came of old New England stock; his forebears had made the great adventure over sea in 1623. His mother, Elizabeth Douglass, and his father, Ephraim Adams, were a like-minded pair, representative of the soundest traditions of New England character and nurture. Ephraim Adams, one of a small band of missionaries from Andover Theological Seminary who forsook everything for Christ's sake, arrived on the open prairies of Iowa in 1842—the goal of three weeks' hard journey from Albany, New York. Their mission it was to kindle and tend the torch, not merely of religion, but also of education, among the far-flung pioneers. Consequently, it is impossible to understand why Henry Adams was what he was, became what he became, unless one can evoke sympathetic appreciation of the temper which determined his upbringing. For example, it may well astonish us to learn that his nineteenth birthday was but a few months off ere he received his first formal instruction. The reasons thereof may astonish us even more. The child had been sickly always, physicians informing the parents that he could not survive the age of fourteen. The "open prairies" proved his physical salvation. Given a cayuse

<sup>1</sup> Memorial presented to the Senate of the University of Michigan.

and a gun, the boy roamed free, passing from missionary home to missionary home, sometimes bearing parental messages to the scattered preachers. In this way he outgrew debility and, better still, acquired a love for nature, and an intimacy with our average citizenry, never lost. Meanwhile, the elder Adams taught him Greek, Latin, and Hebrew as occasion permitted. At length, in 1869, he entered Denmark Academy whence, after a single year, he was able to proceed to Iowa College, Grinnell, where he graduated in 1874. During these five years, the man whom we knew started to shape himself.

In the home and the wider circle of friends, the impressionable days of childhood had been molded by Puritanism. God's providence, the responsibility of man, the absolute distinction between right and wrong, with all resultant duties and prohibitions, set the perspective. Fortunately, the characteristic Yankee interest in education—in intelligence rather than learning—contributed a vital element. An active mind enlarged the atmosphere of the soul. Despite its straight limitations as some reckon them, here was a real culture, giving men inner harmony with self secure from disturbance from the baser passions. As we are aware now, disturbance came otherwise. To quote Adams' own words, he was "plagued by doctrines" from the time he went to the Academy. The spiritual impress of the New England home never left him; it had been etched upon his very being. But, thus early, Calvinistic dogma aroused misgiving, because its sheer profundity bred high doubt. As a matter of course, Ephraim Adams expected his son to follow the Christian ministry, and Henry himself foresaw no other calling meantime. Hence, when skepticism assailed him, he was destined to a terrible, heart-searching experience, the worse that domestic affection drew him one way, mental integrity another. His first years at Grinnell were bootless; the prescribed studies held no attraction and, likely enough, sickness had left a certain lethargy. But, when he came to history, philosophy, and social questions, he felt a new appeal. His Junior and Senior years, eager interest stimulating, profited him much. Still dubious, he taught for a year after graduation at Nashua, Iowa. Then, bowing to

paternal prayer and maternal hope, he entered Andover Theological Seminary, not to prepare for the ministry, however, but "to try himself out"—to discover whether preaching were possible for him. In the spring of 1876, he had decided irrevocably that it was not. Adams' "first" education—education by the natal group—ended here. It had guaranteed him the grace which is the issue of moral habit, had wedded him to the conviction that justice is truth in action. For, although he abandoned certain theological formulas, the footfall of spiritual things ever echoed through his character. The union of winsome gentleness with stern devotion to humanitarian ideals, so distinctive of Professor Adams, rooted in the persistent influence of the New England conscience.

Turning to the "second" education, destined to enrol our colleague among economic leaders, it is necessary to recall once again conditions almost forgotten now. When, forty-five years ago, an academy- and college-bred lad, destined for the ministry, found it necessary to desist, he was indeed "all at sea." For facilities, offered on every hand today by the graduate schools of the great universities, did not exist. The youth might drift—into journalism, teaching, or what not. But drifting was not on Adams' program. He wrote to his parents who, tragically enough, could not understand him, "I must obtain another cultural training." His mind had dwelt already upon social, political, and economic problems; therefore, the "second" education must be non-theological. Whither could he look? At this crisis his course was set by one of those small accidents which, strange to tell, play a decisive part in many lives. By mere chance, he came upon a catalogue of Johns Hopkins University, so late in the day, moreover, that his application for a fellowship, with an essay inclosed as evidence of fitness, arrived just within time-limits. Adams was chosen one of ten Fellows from a list of more than three hundred candidates, and to Baltimore he went in the fall of 1876. His letters attest that the new, ampler opportunities attracted him strongly. He availed himself of concerts, for music always moved him. Here he heard the classics for the first time. Hitherto he had known

only sacred music. Sometimes he played in church and, as records show, he sang in our choral union while a young professor. We find, too, that he served as assistant in the Johns Hopkins library, not for the extravagant salary, as he remarks humorously, but on account of access to books—"I am reading myself full." His summers were spent in his native state, working in the fields. In 1878 he received the doctorate, the first conferred by the young and unique university.

The day after graduation President Gilman sent for him, and told him, "You must go to Europe." The reply was typical—"I can't, I haven't a cent." Gilman continued, "I shall see what can be done," with the result that the benefactor to whom Adams dedicated his first book found the requisite funds. Brief stays at Oxford and Paris, lengthier at Berlin and Heidelberg, filled the next fourteen months. The journalistic bee still buzzing in his head, Adams had visited Godkin before leaving for Europe to discuss the constructive political journalism he had in mind. Godkin received him kindly, but, as Adams dryly remarks, had a long way to travel ere he could understand. In the summer of 1878, President Andrew D. White, of Cornell, traveling in Germany, summoned Adams to discuss a vacancy in this university. To Adams' huge disappointment, as the interview developed, it became apparent that White, with a nonchalance some of us remember well, had mistaken H. C. Adams, the budding economist, for H. B. Adams, the budding historian. The vacancy was in history, not in political science or economics. Expectation vanished in thin air. But Adams was not done with. Returning to his *pension*, he sat up all night to draft the outline of a course of lectures which, as he bluntly put it, "Cornell needed." Next day he sought President White again who, being half-persuaded by Adams' verbal exposition, kept the document, saying he would communicate with Cornell, requesting that a place be made for the course if possible. Writing from Saratoga, in September, 1879, Adams tells his mother that all is off at Cornell, that he must abandon his career and buckle down to earning a livelihood. A lapse of ten days transformed the scene. The Cornell appointment had been

arranged, and he went to Ithaca forthwith. So meager were the facilities then offered in the general field of the social sciences that Adams gave one semester, at Cornell and Johns Hopkins respectively, to these subjects in the year 1879-80. The same arrangement continued till 1886, Michigan being substituted for Johns Hopkins in 1881. As older men recall, Dr. Angell taught economics, in addition to international law, till the time of his transfer to Pekin as Minister to China. At this juncture, Adams joined us, forming a life-long association. He himself says that he "gave up three careers—preaching, journalism, and reform—to devote himself to teaching" where he believed his mission lay.

There is no better index to the enormous change that has overtaken the usual approach to social questions than the circumstances which caused Adams' expulsion from Cornell University. *The Scientific American Supplement* (p. 8861) of August 21, 1886, contains the substance of an address, "The Labor Problem." We quote Adams' comments, inscribed beside the clipping in his personal scrapbook.

This is the article that caused my dismissal from Cornell. This article was given on the spur of the moment. Professor Thurston had invited a man from New York to address the engineering students, but the lecturer failed to come. I was asked to come in and say a few words on the Gould Strike. It was said to me that other members of the Faculty would speak, and that I might present my views as an advocate.

The room was crowded for, besides the engineering society, my own students, getting word of it, came over to the Physical Laboratory room where the addresses of the society were given. A more inspiring audience no man could have, and I spoke with ease, with pleasure and, from the way my words were received, with effect. The New York papers reported what I said and, three days after, Mr. Henry Sage, than whom I know no more honest hypocrite or un-Christian a Christian came in to the President's office and, taking the clipping from the *New York Times* out of his pocket, said, "This man must go, he is sapping the foundations of our society." It was not until then that I thought of putting what I said into print, but then I did it, following as nearly as possible what I said and the way I said it.

The effect of this episode upon myself was to learn that what I said might possibly be of some importance.

Of course, there is a good deal of secret history connected with the matter, but I am not likely to forget that.

This echo of old, far-off, unhappy things is most suggestive, because more than any other man, perhaps, Adams mediated the vast, silent change marking these last thirty-five years. As has been aptly said, "He had a most romantic intellectual career."

In 1887, he was appointed to the Michigan chair which he greatly graced till death. At this time, too, on the urgent request of his close friend, Judge Thomas M. Cooley, then chairman, he joined the Interstate Commerce Commission, much against his own inclination. When he founded the Statistical Department, he had the assistance of a single clerk; when he resigned, in 1911, the personnel numbered two hundred and fifty. *Mutatis mutandis*, a parallel expansion overtook our department of economics under his leadership.

It must suffice merely to mention his services with the Eleventh Census, the Michigan Tax Commission, and the Chinese Republic, pointing out that such positions come only to men of high distinction and proved authority. More than a quarter of a century has elapsed since his election to the presidency of the American Economic Association, which he helped to found; nearly as long since he was presiding officer of the American Statistical Association. In short, he ranked among the most important and influential leaders in his chosen field. His Alma Mater honored herself in honoring him with the degree of LL.D. twenty-three years ago; Wisconsin followed suit in 1903; Johns Hopkins in 1915. Needless to say, he had many offers, some most tempting, to leave Michigan. But, entertaining profound confidence in the state university, believing that it was destined to be instrumental in the diffusion of those opportunities in higher education indispensable to a free democracy, he refused to move. In attachment to this university, like not a few men whom she has imported, he outdid many alumni.

Naturally, Adams produced a mass of original work.<sup>1</sup> Upon two fields of economic investigation particularly—public finance and public control—he imposed a durable imprint. His interest in public finance dated from his doctoral dissertation,

<sup>1</sup> A bibliography is appended. We are indebted to Professor Sharfman for this.

*Taxation in the United States, 1789-1816*. In *Public Debts, an Essay in the Science of Finance*, later translated into Japanese, and in *The Science of Finance, an Investigation of Public Expenditures and Public Revenues*, he not only manifested wide economic grasp and remarkable power of analysis, but exhibited the principles of public finance as a scientific unity, in their manifold relations to social, political, and economic progress. His memorable essay, *The Relation of the State to Industrial Action*, marked his initial, and most significant, contribution in the field of public control. He subjected the prevalent doctrine of laissez faire to searching analysis, and with profound appreciation of the demands of a dynamic world, formulated basic principles for the guidance of industrial legislation. His emphasis on the function of the state in molding the plane of competitive action, in realizing for society the benefits of monopolistic control, and in restoring conditions of social harmony to the economic order, foreshadowed much of the theoretical discussion and practical reorganization of a later day. His subsequent achievements in the development of public control, especially over railroad transportation, are incorporated in the accounts and classifications which he slowly evolved as statistician of the Interstate Commerce Commission. The universal acceptance today of statuted accounting and statistical practice as an indispensable instrument for the effective regulation of railroads and public utilities remains a lasting monument to the intelligence and validity of his pioneering efforts. It is a distinct loss to economic scholarship and to historical tradition that his *American Railway Accounting*, published seven years after his resignation from the Interstate Commerce Commission, was but a commentary on these accounts and classifications rather than that graphic picture of their origin and development which he alone was competent to produce.

Throughout life, Adams' intellectual approach was that of a social philosopher rather than of a technical economist. This is plain throughout his published work. Intuitive yearning for social justice, prompted by a Puritan conscience, stimulated by an analytical intellect, colored all his writings. Human relations uniformly served as his point of departure, and humane ameliora-



tion was ever the horizon toward which he moved. Such was the spirit of *The Relation of the State to Industrial Action*, and of his fundamental studies in public finance. His papers on the social movements of our time, and on the social ministry of wealth, contributed to the *International Journal of Ethics*; his discussions, in the economic journals, of economics and jurisprudence, publicity and corporate abuses, and of many of the more technical aspects of railroad taxation; of the development of the trust movement, budget reform, and foreign investments as a crucial element in international maladjustments, were molded by a similar insight into primary human relations, and by a like desire to contribute to the realization of human betterment.

Accordingly, it was the more remarkable that Professor Adams proved himself so effective a public servant in the formulation of practical and concrete machinery for the regulation of transportation agencies, in this country and in China. The reason for this success is to be found in his consistent adherence to the conception of accounts and statistics as mere instruments of social control rather than as fields of inquiry for their own sake. From first to last, then, he remained the social philosopher. His plans for the future promised a return to the synthetic intellectual activity of his early career. Death overtook him with his labors unfinished, but the direction of his interests was clear and unmistakable.

In sum, then, remarkable as was the career, formative as were its results, the personality overtopped all else, mainly because Adams' austere judgment of self, his high innocent attitude toward his great attainments, won upon others. Indeed, no one would have been more surprised than he at the words we have addressed to you this evening—partly on account of his innate modesty, partly thanks to his very reticence, which prevented us from making known to him how we esteemed his deep, pervasive glow.

S. LAWRENCE BIGELOW  
I. LEO SHARFMAN  
R. M. WENLEY, *Chairman*

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